From Tutoring to Teaching: Advice I Should Have Taken and Connections I Should Have Made

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I have taught writing/communication for five years and consecutively for four. Preceding both periods of teaching were very informative and groundbreaking years as a tutor in two amazing communication centers. To say that these centers had a profound impact on my pedagogy is an understatement. I always strive to be a reflective teacher, but I will admit I sometimes don't readily make connections that would be advantageous to my teaching. This piece, then, is a look backwards to one of the key pieces of advice I received as a tutor, advice I would have done well to heed when I began teaching. My hope in drawing attention to my missed opportunities is to arm both tutors and teachers (especially tutors who are considering teaching) against such mistakes, and help both parties become conscious of the ways of thinking of the other. When tutors and teachers share common strategies for supporting students, the students they serve are destined for success.

As a tutor, one of the most important pieces of advice I received was to avoid taking a "Scattershot approach." Simply put, a scattershot approach is taking a wide aim at a tutoring session and jumping around from idea to idea without a clear plan. In other words, you bring up anything and everything, hoping to find what your student needs. As I've described it, a scattershot approach sounds at best not productive, and at worst irresponsible, so what tutor on earth would ever want to take such an approach? Well, a scattershot approach is easy to slip into because it is often justifiable in the moment. Picture the last story or article you read. There was probably a clever title, inciting events, gripping details, etc. Any number of elements can grab us at any moment, and any of them could be vital to the success of a text. However, there are two main concerns with taking such an approach: one, it misses an opportunity to model rhetorical planning for a student (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010), and two, its lack of planning can burn valuable time needed in a session. I would have done well to remember this advice when I transitioned from tutor to teacher.

As in tutoring, avoiding a scattershot approach in teaching is vital. To say it differently, it is necessary for a teacher to have a clear purpose when assigning a task. "To see how well a student can write or reason," I argue, is not a strong enough purpose. I recall the first assignment I gave to first-year students when I began teaching. I asked my students to write a "compare/contrast" essay using "Why the Rich Are Getting Richer and the Poor, Poorer" by Robert Reich (2017) and a *Cracked* online magazine article. I remember how excited I was to read my first student essays as a teacher, and I remember very vividly the sinking feeling that engulfed me when I began grading. This is not to say that what my students produced wasn't "good," but that I had no inkling of an idea of what "good" meant for my class and for my assignment. I began latching onto anything I could in an effort to give my students feedback. Spelling, punctuation,

titles, citations, anecdotes, the list went on and on. Because my assignment lacked a clear purpose, so did my grading. I can't recall how long I spent grading those essays, but I remember emerging from a grading bender ready to give up on teaching altogether. After all, I was teaching two sections as a graduate assistant, so how could some teachers manage a 4/4 or even a 5/5 courseload, some with student numbers in the 150 range? The task seemed insurmountable, that is, until I remembered the advice I was given as a tutor: avoid the scattershot approach. To successfully and fairly grade student work, not only did I have to have a clear picture of what I was evaluating my students on, but they had to have that clear picture as well. Grading with a selective eye, just as in tutoring, helped me to maximize my time and helped me to model my feedback in a way that suggested a hierarchy of importance to my students. Ideas like argument, crafting a thesis/claim, engaging with authors all became go-to suggestions, not only because they represent skills that are important for the field of writing/communication studies, but because my assignment prompts clearly indicated that those ideas were important.

The semesters that have followed have been much less chaotic and I owe that to my introduction to the rhetorical situation, "... a situation where a speaker or writer sees a need to change reality and sees that the change may be effected through rhetorical discourse" (Grant-Davie, 2014, p. 350). I use Grant-Davie in my first-year writing/communication courses because he offers a concrete definition of rhetorical situation (and breaks it down into four easy-to-apply parts), that can drastically shape the ways students approach curricular and extracurricular situations. Audience(s), rhetor(s), and constraints are all essential players in any given situation students find themselves in, both academically and non. Of the four he lists, Exigence–an invitation to respond to a situation in writing–has become the most important. For students to know why they write is critical. Purpose creates drive and shapes cognition. The clearer the purpose, the clearer the target. If the buck stops at "compare and contrast" then students are left with a moving target that they may try to hit with scattershot.

Whether tutoring, teaching, grading, or designing assignment prompts, be advised: avoid the scattershot approach. In my excitement to explore the world of teaching, I forgot this, and because of that, I fought against myself every time I sat down to read and provide feedback to student work. If a clear rhetorical purpose is established, then students, teachers, and tutors can all work toward the same end (and avoid those sinking feelings as well).

References

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